



Date: 29 January 2004

To: Coastal Conservancy Board Members

From: Sam Schuchat, Executive Officer
Deborah Ruddock, project manager

Subject: **Resolution: Laguna Coast Wilderness; Proposition 12 Funds**

The Laguna Canyon Foundation, the City of Laguna Beach, and the County of Orange request that the Conservancy board adopt a resolution finding that funds allocated under Proposition 12 for the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (LCWP) currently exceed funds needed for available projects (see letter from project proponents, Attachment A). The proposed resolution, presented in the text of this memo, is envisioned as the first step in solving the problem presented by the narrow confines of the Proposition's language. Its adoption will enable legislators to reallocate LCWP funds to projects in the larger South Coast Wilderness (see map, Attachment B), which includes the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park.

BACKGROUND

The process of assembling a greenbelt for habitat and public access up and down coast and inland from the City of Laguna Beach began approximately 35 years ago. Most of the greenbelt, known broadly as the South Coast Wilderness (SCW), was once part of the Irvine Ranch. A number of tenacious citizens groups formed to prevent development, raise private and public funds for acquisition, elect like-minded local agency representatives, pass local initiatives and tax measures, and assist with management of property acquired. These groups include the early Citizens' Town Planning Association, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., the Laguna Canyon Foundation, the Laguna Canyon Conservancy, and the Coastal Greenbelt Authority. Over the years, the Irvine Company has donated and dedicated much of the land, and the rest has been acquired by state and local agencies.

The Coastal Conservancy has long assisted with planning and restoration of habitat in the greenbelt. In the late 1970s, the Coastal Conservancy helped design what was then known as the Aliso Greenbelt. Later, the Coastal Conservancy provided funding for restoration of habitat in the Laguna Lakes, Orange County's only natural freshwater lakes, which lie in what is now the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. In 2002, the Coastal Conservancy worked with State Parks on disposition of the cottages at Crystal Cove. Just outside the greenbelt, on the shoreline of Laguna Beach, the Coastal Conservancy has assisted with many beach access projects.

Proposition 12 (the “Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000”) allocates \$12,500,000 to the Conservancy to “acquire land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park.” Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(g). The Legislature appropriated a portion of the funds to the Coastal Conservancy in FY 2000/01 and the balance in FY 2001/02. In 2002, a 10.6-acre parcel adjacent to the LCWP became available under the terms of a settlement agreement between the City of Laguna Woods and the landowner, Rossmoor Properties. The City and the Laguna Canyon Foundation asked the Coastal Conservancy to provide funding. In May 2002, the Conservancy authorized funding of \$2,435,000 for the City of Laguna Woods to acquire the property for inclusion in the LCWP. The City has concluded the transaction and is working on an agreement to lease the land to the County of Orange, which manages the park. At the March 2004 meeting, Conservancy staff will ask the board to consider authorizing funds for two additional acquisitions in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park Area.

Nevertheless, it has become clear to the Foundation, the City, and the County that Proposition 12 funds as allocated currently and for the foreseeable future exceed the estimated costs of acquisition projects for which there are willing sellers. The Foundation, the City, and the County have identified numerous other high-priority properties within the SCW with willing sellers, purchase of which would be consistent with Division 21 and with the broader purpose expressed in an early version of Proposition 12 before the Legislature. That version, contained in AB 18 (Chapter 461 of 1999), would have allocated twelve million five hundred thousand dollars (\$12,500,000) “to acquire land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in Orange County.”

In a letter included as Attachment C, Senator Ross Johnson, instrumental in crafting the \$12.5 million allocation, explains that the final language approved by the legislature failed to reflect the original intent of the framer and local proponents. As mentioned earlier in this memo, the top priority of community leaders, local parks officials and citizens has been completing assemblage of Orange County’s South Coast Wilderness (SCW) greenbelt. The SCW comprises more than 19,000 acres of parks, open space, and marine preserves, including the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, Crystal Cove State Park, Irvine Company Open Space Reserves (managed by The Nature Conservancy), Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, a small ecological reserve owned by the Department of Fish and Game, and several Laguna Beach open space sites. Under Public Resources Code Section 5096.3075, the Legislature may reallocate Proposition 12 funding to include the South Coast Wilderness if the Conservancy, as administering agency, makes an appropriate finding. The recommended finding is as follows:

Proposed Resolution for Adoption by the Coastal Conservancy

“Pursuant to Section 5096.3075 of the Public Resources Code, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that funds allocated to the State Coastal Conservancy under Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(g) are in excess of the total needed for Laguna Coast Wilderness Park projects.”